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E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [RS](#) [EN](#)  
SUBJECT: ESTONIAN SCHOOL REFORM IN ACTION

REF A)05 TALLINN 1152 B)06 TALLINN 418

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: On September 1, 2007, all 58 public Russian language high schools in Estonia began teaching Estonian Literature in the Estonian language. This program, which affects approximately 8,500 Russian-speaking students, is the first step of a gradual transition to reach the point where 60 percent of classroom instruction in Russian high schools is taught in the Estonian language by 2011. While some members of the Russian-speaking community had previously criticized the GOE's plan (ref A and B), early assessments indicate that implementation is proceeding smoothly. At the same time, the Government of Estonia (GOE) has acknowledged -- and is working to address -- several areas of concern, such as teacher shortages and lack of resources. END SUMMARY.

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NOT A NEW IDEA  
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¶2. (U) Convincing Russian speakers in Estonia to speak Estonian is a major political issue and has been for some time (Ref A). Part of the GOE's efforts includes a policy of 'transitioning' schools; i.e., persuading schools where subjects are taught in the main in Russian to accept a program that is predominantly taught in the Estonian language. The Estonian national education curriculum has mandated instruction in Estonian language courses in primary schools where the language of instruction is not Estonian, since 1999. In addition, since 2000, 30 Russian language middle schools (out of a total of 58), and 24 Russian language kindergartens (out of 70), have joined a voluntary language immersion program in which students receive instruction and specialized materials on a wide range of subjects in both Estonian and Russian. Currently, half of all non-Estonian middle schools apply language immersion methods and approximately 3,400 Russian speaking students (out of a total student population of 33,308), study in special language immersion schools and kindergartens.

¶3. (U) Estonia's Parliament adopted the current transition program, a component of the 'Basic School and Upper Secondary School Act', in 1997 (ref A). The Act envisioned a ten-year preparation period prior to implementation of the program. The National Action Plan (NAP), adopted by parliament in March 2006, mapped out funding provisions for the transition and a preliminary proposal outlining the order in which subsequent subjects to be taught in Estonian would be introduced (ref B). The NAP only affects instruction at the high school or gymnasium level, which is not compulsory in Estonia. Students at this level may also choose to attend vocational or trade schools, which are not affected by the transition program.

14. (U) This fall, the MOE updated the instructions outlined in the NAP in order to better guide the future stages of the transition program. At the start of the school year in September, all 58 public Russian-language high schools introduced Estonian literature classes in Estonian. According to the NAP, in the 2008-2009 academic year, schools must implement a second subject in Estonian, either music or civics. The following year, schools must introduce a third course in Estonian (the subject they did not choose the previous year.) In the fourth and fifth years of the program, schools will introduce Estonian history and world geography in Estonian respectively.

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Creating a sphere of equality  
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15. (U) According to the MOE and the non-Estonians' Integration Foundation, the primary goal of the education transition program is to guarantee equal study and working opportunities for all graduates of Estonian public schools. All public Estonian universities employ Estonian as the language of instruction, and the majority of public sector jobs in Estonia require fluency in Estonian as a primary qualification. A basic level competency in Estonian is also required in order to obtain Estonian citizenship. Prior to graduating from public secondary schools, all non-native Estonian-speaking students are required to take an Estonian language proficiency exam. These exams have been integrated with the national language proficiency exams. Upon graduation, students receive an intermediate level proficiency certificate which can be used when applying for citizenship.

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The Russian perspective  
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16. (U) An October 2007 poll by Saar, the largest marketing research firm in Estonia, showed that two-thirds of Russian speakers in Estonia are very concerned about introducing Estonian languages classes in high schools. They fear that the overall quality of education for Russian speakers will decline and command of the Russian language will deteriorate. Over the course of the past year, several articles have appeared in the Russian-speaking press criticizing the transition. Some reports suggested that the transition is an attempt to 'assimilate' rather than 'integrate' Russians. One article said the transition program could create a situation in which Russian students graduate with inferior skills and are not able to compete with their Estonian counterparts in the labor market. The articles quoted parents who fear that if their children do choose to attend secondary school, they will lose their familiarity with both the Russian language and cultural identity. At the same time, they fear their children will also receive lower scores than Estonian students in subjects taught in Estonian, thereby decreasing their competitive edge at the university level (ref A). However, despite the rhetoric, there were no reported incidents of protest occurring on the first day of classes in September.

17. (SBU) During a recent meeting, Vadim Vaisiliev, a diplomat from the Russian Embassy, told Polecoff that some Russian parents have told him they are afraid their children will choose to go to vocational school instead of secondary school in order to avoid the Estonian language requirement. Vaisiliev noted that during Soviet times people could choose their language of school instruction, whether it was Russian or Estonian. He commented that Russian speakers will learn Estonia if they want to, but he did not see the specific need to force instruction in Estonian. Vaisiliev also commented that he thinks the intent of the program is to decrease

the influence of Russian as opposed to strengthening Estonian.

¶8. (U) In contrast, the MOE views the transition program as a means of providing Russian-speaking students with equal access to Estonia's employment and education markets. The NAP currently calls for only one hour of instruction a week in Estonian, and has put in place measures at the middle school level to ensure students possess adequate Estonian language skills prior to reaching high school. At the university level, the GOE will pay for one year of Estonian language training for students with insufficient knowledge of Estonian. The MOE has also publicly recognized the importance of Russian language and literature studies and has said that instruction in these subject areas will not be reduced.

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Addressing deficiencies  
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¶9. (U) According to a 2006 study conducted by the MOE, the availability of high quality study materials (textbooks and supplemental texts) used by Russian schools is a priority concern. Under the NAP, the MOE is supposed to provide high school students affected by the transition program with free textbooks with companion CDs and dictionaries. The MOE has also formed a council of master teachers which is in charge of preparing all transition teaching materials. The NAP also allocates funds dedicated to updating teaching materials for native Russian speakers (ref B).

¶10. (U) Officials at the MOE and in the Ministry of Population Affairs remain concerned, however, about the use of 'unofficial' instructional materials by teachers in the Russian schools ' including Russian Federation-produced textbooks and news reports. There are many reports that teachers use these materials to supplement, replace and/or contradict official texts. However, as one official told us, the MOE does not have the resources to 'monitor what is going on in every classroom in Estonia,' and so must 'trust their instructors to use the proper texts.'

¶11. (U) Both the MOE and the non-Estonian Integration Foundation are concerned that there will not be enough qualified teachers to teach the additional Estonian-language classes each year. Extremely low salaries and a lack of prestige associated with the teaching profession are both major factors contributing to the problem. Currently, the average teacher's salary in Estonia is 8,260 eek a month. MOE has proposed several initiatives intended to attract teachers to critical shortage areas (including Narva where 98 percent of the population speaks Russian and it is very difficult to find teachers who speak Estonian). Teachers willing to work in 'high needs' schools outside of Tartu and Tallinn and who pledge a five-year commitment will receive an additional 200,000 eek (just over USD 19,000). Teachers who resign before the contract expires will be required to pay back a percentage of the money. In July 2007, the Vice Chancellor of the MOE announced that Russian language schools will also received an additional 70,000 eek (6,500 USD) for each subject they offer in Estonian beyond what is required by the NAP. Individual school principals will have discretion concerning how to distribute the money, but it is expected that it will be used primarily to increase the salaries of Russian- and Estonian-language teachers. (A representative from the MOE was quick to point out to polecoff that the MOE realizes the importance of supporting Russian-language teachers during this transition as well).

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite earlier criticism from the Russian-speaking community and press outlets during the planning stages of the language transition project, it is striking how little controversy has surrounded the actual

implementation. This may in fact mean that schools were well prepared and students and parents were more accepting of the transition once they had an opportunity to observe it in practice. Officials from the MOE state that it is too early to measure the success of the transition program. However, there are plans to initiate a counseling process with individual schools and prepare a questionnaire for 10th graders concerning attitudes towards the transition and quality of materials provided. Teachers, parents and principals will also participate in the discussion. Post will continue to follow and report on developments in this area. End Comment.

PHILLIPS